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301732Z Mar 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001087

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STATE PASS USAID FOR DCHA/OTI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER PEREZ: RELATIONS COULD NOT GET WORSE

Classified By: Political Counselor Abelardo A. Arias for Reason 1.4(d)

Summary:

[11](#). (C) In a March 23 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Jesus Perez said the relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela could not get worse. Perez said there was a lot of fear in the GoV that the USG was planning to overthrow the Chavez regime. The Ambassador told him that there is no USG plan to topple Chavez, but noted that relations could indeed get much worse unless Chavez tempers his anti-U.S. remarks, personal insults and invective. The Ambassador said it was in the GoV's interest to speak with the USG so that we can understand their point of view. The Ambassador reiterated that U.S. policy seeks a democratic solution and noted our concern that the GoV was slowly taking control of public institutions. End Summary.

Could Relations Be Worse?

[12](#). (C) On March 23, the Ambassador met with newly-installed Foreign Minister Jesus Perez for a frank and open exchange of views on U.S.- Venezuela relations. The Ambassador brought up an interview with Perez published March 21 in the Caracas daily El Universal, in which Perez said the relationship between Venezuela and the U.S. "could not be worse." The Ambassador noted with surprise that this article included a version of the Ambassador's last conversation with Perez. The Ambassador stressed that diplomatic conversations are confidential. He told the Foreign Minister that contrary to

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what Perez had told the reporter, bilateral relations could indeed get worse. Relations, he continued, are bad because President Chavez appeared determined to use the U.S. as a foil to build his own domestic support.

[13](#). (C) Perez responded that he wanted to be transparent and honest and hoped to compliment the Ambassador by calling him disciplined. He then backtracked somewhat and said the article misquoted him and distorted what he had told the reporter. Perez said he hoped that he and the Ambassador could be "sincere" and solve whatever problems in the bilateral relationship the Ambassador saw needed improvement.

He recalled telling a colleague that the relationships between our governments are "tense," but that he could "speak to Shapiro as a man," not just as a government representative. Perez noted that the rhetoric between Presidents Bush and Chavez was "very hot," but the Ambassador and FM could speak with mutual respect. Perez said his job was to work with the Ambassador to see ways in which they could improve matters between their countries.

Fear of the U.S.

[14](#). (C) Perez said there was a lot of fear in the GoV that the USG was planning to overthrow the Chavez regime. He pointed to Haiti, and said remarks by POTUS at the recent Summit in Monterey had not helped. The Ambassador responded that there is no USG plan to topple Chavez, and that such rumors were only the product of a vivid imagination. On the other hand, the personal insults and invectives hurled at the USG by Chavez in regular broadcasts are from the highest levels of the GoV. The Ambassador listed personal attacks against President Bush, the Secretary and the National Security Advisor, insults that contained elements of racial slurs, or profanity, and suggestions that the Bush administration represented the activity behind the assassinations of Martin Luther King and President John F. Kennedy. Perez said he thought relations could improve if the two presidents were to meet. The Ambassador replied that it is most unlikely that

President Bush would meet with someone who regularly insults him.

15. (C) Perez distanced himself from Chavez's remarks, noting that he had been trained in Europe and was therefore unaccustomed to engaging in such displays. Perez said that while he trusted Chavez implicitly, he recognized that Chavez was a military man who held the "people in his heart." Perez said it was his assignment, and that of the Ambassador, to communicate with their respective presidents and eliminate such excess language. Perez said he believed in a stronger relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela in the future. But it was difficult now because the USG speaks with the opposition. Perez also asserted that the U.S. is unpopular because of its international policies. If the U.S. can talk with Libya, he added, then surely Venezuela and the U.S. can talk. We have to solve this, said Perez, and not allow the press to invent problems between the two countries.

16. (C) The Ambassador told Perez the USG speaks with representatives of both sides and would continue to do so to gain a thorough understanding of the country. The Ambassador noted that few from Chavez's ruling MVR party would speak with emboffs, but that was in spite of the USG continuing to extend invitations. The Ambassador said it was in the GoV's interest to maintain contact with the Embassy so that we can understand their point of view. If one reporting overly represents the views of the opposition it is because the GoV has ordered its officials and supporters to have to contact with the Embassy. Perez acknowledged that the GoV has embargoed the Embassy.

Dynamics of the Bilateral Relation

17. (C) The Ambassador said the press had not invented problems between the USG and the GoV. Diosdad Cabello and A/S Noriega had agreed to avoid "microphone diplomacy." Nonetheless, the GoV had almost immediately implemented a public relations campaign about alleged U.S. intervention in Venezuela. The USG does not publicly respond to insults by Chavez because the issue is not a bilateral one, but a problem between Chavez and his Venezuelan opposition. The USG policy is to support OAS Resolution 833, i.e., to find a peaceful, democratic, constitutional and electoral solution to the on-going crisis, and to support the on-going efforts by the OAS and the Carter Center in their roles as observers and facilitators.

Democracy With an Asterisk

18. (C) The Ambassador concluded that our hope is that Venezuela will prosper in peace and democracy with an improving economy. But this cannot be a democracy with an asterisk, where the GoV slowly takes control of public institutions, or where GoV officials including Chavez say that signing a petition permitted under the constitution is considered the equivalent of conspiring against the government. Perez conceded that the GoV had overreacted and had in fact gone beyond the constitution. But he justified those actions as the result of April 2002. Just as the U.S. responded to September 11 by infringing somewhat on citizens' rights, so too had the GoV responded to the "coup" of 2002 and the "economic sabotage" of 2003.

Update on Approval for New Ambassador

19. (C) The Ambassador asked for an update on the pending request for agreement for the new Ambassador. Perez apologized for any delay and said the ministry bureaucracy had been very busy, but hoped the paperwork would be done in a week or so. The Ambassador explained the internal process in the U.S. to confirm a nominated ambassador through the Senate, and noted that during an election year, the legislature would be out of session sooner than normal. Accordingly, getting the approval from Venezuela would be

particularly helpful. Perez agreed to look into it.

Comment:

110. (C) Perez speaks in platitudes and shows little understanding of the complexities of the U.S.-Venezuela governmental relationship. He largely built his life in France, and peppers his conversation with references to his experience there, having little regional experience from which to draw. He demonstrates a fundamental lack of

understanding of the United States government and culture.
He is, however, smooth, and so serves the GoV as a
shock-absorber in the wake of the tough Chavez statements.
It is doubtful that Perez will be a useful conduit to Chavez.
He has some access to Chavez-- he is said to be Chavez's
half-brother or, if not, a childhood friend. But it is
unclear that Chavez will listen to him.
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